



**6 cours Mirabeau**  
AIX-EN-PROVENCE



**BNP PARIBAS**

The bank for a changing world

# 6 COURS MIRABEAU

The story of BNP Paribas in Aix-en-Provence began in 1893, when its forerunner bank, the *Comptoir national d'escompte de Paris* (CNEP), opened a branch at 10 *cours Mirabeau* in the mansion called Hôtel Isoard de Vauvenargues. But, in 1905, the branch moved out and established at number 6 in the mansion dubbed Hôtel Margalet de Luynes, a magnificent example of French classical 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture.

Its over one-hundred-and-ten-year continued presence on site is a testament to the bank's unwavering dedication to local businesses and communities as consumption patterns changed. Even though the 1942 National Heritage listing of the iconic *cours Mirabeau* obliged the bank while undertaking successive renovation works, many of the original features and historical feel were carefully preserved in the modern offices laid out in the former family quarters of the building.

Upon its re-opening in January 2016 after a six month refurbishment, the branch now yields a fresh new approach to banking within a lively and digitally-equipped structure in which History and Modernity smoothly interact.



Cours Mirabeau

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The ***cours Mirabeau*** emerged from the Parliament of Provence, which 1649 and 1651 acts commanded the city south rampart to be razed to create a fashionable thoroughfare for carriages akin to the **Florentine trend set in Paris by the Queen Regent Maria de Medici**. On either side, the land was divided into plots, where private mansions were erected overlooking the new avenue, cooled by its curtain of lined elms and a number of fountains.

In 1710, **Antoine de Margalet, Lord of Luynes**, a councillor at the *Chambre des Comptes* (Royal Audit Chamber), bought a plot to build an exquisite residence with a formal garden at the rear, abutting the outbuilding accessed from a parallel street, the *rue Mazarine*.

The three-storey dwelling boasts a sober façade in **pale gold stone from the nearby Bibemus quarry** – famously immortalised in Paul Cézanne’s masterpieces during the next century – punctuated by seven bays and an entrance portal with Doric columns and a frieze of alternating triglyphs and metopes. The internal design of adjoining rooms is well-suited to entertaining with the formal drawing rooms opening southward. Their ***gypseries* (plasterwork) ornamentation** is graced with painted door-tops, overmantels and gilded wood framed mirrors. But northward is the amazing ***Mounines* (Monkey) Room** where, according to the great Provençal tradition, mischievous and hilarious monkey scenes were carved in the manner of 18<sup>th</sup> century artist Christophe Huet.

It did not take long before the general expansion of Aix-en-Provence, combined with its geographical location



The Cours Mirabeau at the end of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century



Antoine de Margalet de Luynes

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Plasterwork decor in the Monkey Room



The main hall, renovated in 2015

at the crossroads of important routes, began to turn the *cours Mirabeau* into a public thoroughfare. To the general distress of the mansion owners, a café opened in 1748, which spelled the end of the privacy they had hitherto enjoyed. In 1777, the huge Sea Horses Fountain was demolished to facilitate vehicle entry into the town. The same year a hostelry, *Hôtel des Princes*, was set up at number 3. From the day it opened, it attracted a numerous and high-calibre clientele, as the city nicknamed **Little Provençal Versailles** already delighted its guests with its charm and beauty. The three-man embassy sent by the **Indian Sultan Tipu Sahib** to King Louis XVI stayed there in 1788. **When CNEP, which opened branches in Calcutta and Bombay in 1860**, decided to move into *cours Mirabeau*, were its directors aware that the first-ever Indian ambassadors to Europe had brushed past the bank façade?

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, further developments led to the construction of *place de la Rotonde* and a train station at the bottom of the *cours*, which was hard-surfaced while plane trees replaced the old elms. In 1876, the *cours* was named *Mirabeau* in honour of a native moderate leader in the early stages of the French Revolution. One side became lined with hotels, cafés and courier services, while on the other side the ground floors of the private mansions were turned into shops. With the emergence of new lifestyles, Aix revived its **thermal baths**, and became a **stopover on the tourist route to the Côte d'Azur**. The town also consolidated its position as the **global capital of almond trade**. Meanwhile, its financial network, hitherto dominated

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The main hall, renovated in 2015

by **family banks** connected with regional trade, such as Cézanne & Cabissol, or the financiers Abram-Crémiéu & Cie and Milhaud frères, gradually faced competition from lending institutions of national scope.

After changing hands twice, the mansion was bought in **1821 by Félicien Agard**, General Manager of the salt producing company *Salins du Midi*; and later in **1885**, by the **Marquis de Gantelmi d'Ille**, who kept the first floor for his household, hence his coat of arms, monogram and portraits of himself

and his wife carved in the main function room decor. The Marquis d'Ille, a prominent local industrialist, was a highly committed member of Nobel Prize writer Frédéric Mistral's *Félibrige*, where he served as *majoral* in 1901. While actively campaigning for the spread of Occitan culture, he hosted in 1890 the musical club founded by local politician Victor Leydet. Moreover as a highly esteemed local with vast business and political connections, he was **appointed a Non-Executive Director of the Banque de France new branch in Aix**



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Entrance of the CNEP branch, around 1906

when it opened in 1898 and until his passing in 1924. In **1905**, after twelve years of operations in Aix, the CNEP management decided they could no longer accept the advertisement restrictions imposed by the lease agreement for the premises at number 10 *cours Mirabeau*, and agreed terms with the Marquis d'Ille to rent the ground floor and garden of his mansion. However, in order to maintain the exclusivity of its trade name, the bank insisted on a clause forbidding the owner of number 6 to let out any other parts of the

mansion to any other financial institution or company using the word *Comptoir* as part of its name.

A new front door, symmetrical to the existing one, was created by lowering the sills of two windows. The Monkey Room became the Director's office. In one of the drawing rooms **decorated with acanthus, quivers and arrows**, a stairway was built to leading down to the Vault. Customers entering the Cashier's Department were welcomed by a **cornice sporting hunting trophies and shells**. The Deputy Manager's office, with its

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The main hall entrance, renovated in 2015

**bagpipe motifs**, was probably the former Music Room. After the purchase of the ground floor and garden in **1970**, BNP undertook major rejuvenations to prepare the branch to **experiment the very first bank card payments in France**, supporting Aix councillors to turn their town into a bastion of retail computerisation.

The magnitude of the **2015** renovations called for substantial changes to the agency existing organization and was extended to include the addition of the first floor newly leased for a **Private Banking Centre**. While

the original architectural features were completely refurbished but fully preserved, the variety of functional areas **help the clients sustain and enhance their operations**. The Monkey Room houses a **switchable glass partitioned meeting room**. Vitra Alcoves provide sheltered niche of privacy in the public hall. The **garden**, peppered with *maxxi poppy* lights by Viabizzuno and equipped with Catellani & Smith *Uomo della Luce* standing light, **rekindles its historical landscape** with verdant square beds and water mist sprays.



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